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Image Database Plan Raises Privacy Concerns

From The Washington Post

The American Civil Liberties Union said Thursday's disclosure that a new Hampshire company received \$15 million in federal funding and technical assistance from the Secret Service to build a national database of driver's license images highlighted the need for congressional hearings to explore enacting new laws to protect personal information.

Meanwhile, several lawmakers who arranged for the funding, including Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-Colo.) and Sen. Ernest P. Hollings (D-S.C.), distanced themselves from the Nashua company. They said they did not understand how Image Data LLC's operation would work, nor that it would entail the purchase of driver's photographs from

the states. The heightened concern about Image Data's initiative followed a Washington Post report citing a September 1997 letter in which Hollings, Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.), Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) and five other members of Congress thanked Campbell for including money in an annual federal funding bill to help the company operate a pilot program of its True ID computer system in South Carolina.

Company officials have said repeatedly that its identity system would use driver's images only to prevent check and credit card fraud. But the letter's signatories said the "technology has widespread potential to reduce crime in the credit and checking fields, in airports to reduce the chances of terrorism, and in immigration and

naturalization to verify proper identity." Image Data came under scrutiny last month after news reports revealed it recently bought more than 22 million driver's images in South Carolina, Florida and Colorado and intended to build a national database to fight retail fraud. Company officials say their computers can flash a tamper-proof photo of a person named on a check or a credit card to a tiny screen at a retailer, enabling a clerk to verify the shopper's identity. A pilot program of the system, using 35 million photographs from South

Carolina, started in August. In response to complaints, officials in Florida and Colorado have halted transfer of their files. South Carolina's attorney general has filed suit to have the company return that state's files. Legislators in all three states have introduced laws that would bar the sale of driver's images. In a Thursday statement, Image Data defended its use of the images and personal information, saying its practices are "governed both by law and by contract."

"We sign contracts with states to limit our use of the information only

for fraud prevention," the statement said. "Image Data continues to believe that the real threat to the consumer privacy is the growing ease of identity theft."

ACLU officials said the questions about Image Data's aims highlight the need for new laws to better protect names, addresses, Social Security numbers and other personal information contained in government databases, while maintaining access for legitimate public use.

Darryl Steinhardt, associate director of the ACLU, said databases are proliferating, often with official sanction, with few laws to protect individuals from unwanted scrutiny. Steinhardt said stricter rules limiting the government's role in

creating such storehouses of information are needed.

"We're on the verge of living in a surveillance society where the most intimate details of our lives are gathered by the government and private companies," Steinhardt said. "We're on the verge of living in a surveillance society where the most intimate details of our lives are gathered by the government and private companies," Steinhardt said.

The Image Data case "shows there isn't one place looking at this and watching what Congress does, how the federal government spends money and how this affects privacy," Mulligan said.

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